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ABSTRACT

In response to enrollment declines, Dutchess Community College (DCC) has developed and implemented a Concensus Planning process to facilitate the responsiveness of its academic curricula. The new planning process is decentralized and faculty oriented, which has led to a stress on curriculum development through substitution and modification. The major outcomes of the planning effort included a set of collegewide objectives organized by major functional areas and activities; a set of specific budget impacts; a comprehensive planning strategy consistent with the Title III federal grant framework; a linkage with reaccreditation efforts; and a working relationship with the college marketing committee. During 1983-84, the collegewide planning committee; task forces on environmental scanning, internal resources, and 1983-84 objectives; and an executive unit worked to develop the first draft of the 1984-85 Consensus Plan. After the plan was reviewed by the President and Deans, it was presented to an assembly of all faculty and administrators. During the first semester of operation under the Consensus Plan, more curriculum proposals were submitted than in the combined total of the previous 4 years. Through the new planning process, DCC has begun to address enrollment questions through comprehensive planning, diminishing concerns about retrenchment and program attrition. (LAL)

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ABSTRACT

THE IMPACT OF DECENTRALIZED PLANNING
FOR CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT AT TWO-YEAR COLLEGES

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Many two-year colleges are beginning to experience enrollment declines for the first time in their histories. An immediate reaction to the decreased resources associated with lowered enrollments has been a reduction of academic course offerings and the development of retrenchment strategies. In contrast to these reactions Dutchess Community College has developed and implemented a Consensus Planning process to facilitate the responsiveness of its academic curricula. This type of development was made possible because the new planning process is decentralized and faculty centered. This has led to stress on curriculum development through substitution and modification. Key elements of the planning structure and process are described.

During the first semester of operation under the Consensus Plan more curriculum proposals were submitted than in the combined total of the last four years. These proposals included the deletion of existing programs, development of new programs, and adjustments of current programs. Thus, a positive result of the Consensus Plan has been to encourage thought relative to the expansion and substitution of curriculum, while decreasing thought concerning retrenchment and program attrition.

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INTRODUCTION

During the recent past, many colleges used planning for the development of new programs and expanded services. The major financial supports for these efforts were the tuition dollars generated by increased enrollments. It became relatively easy to develop curricula that were responsive to student and community need during this growth period. With colleges now facing the prospect of declining enrollments, many administrators and faculty are moving their attention from program development to marketing and retrenchment strategies.

The belief behind these actions is fairly clear. The way to handle declining enrollments is to change your image and learn to "sell what you have." If that doesn't work, the remaining alternative is elimination of excess staff and faculty.

It is our position that neither solution is acceptable, for both lead to the abandonment of any effort at curriculum development and change. Only through such change can colleges adapt to new student demographics and continue to contribute significantly to society.

We envision comprehensive planning as the vehicle through which curriculum change can be mediated.

Richardson (1978) points out that, "If colleges are to remain adaptive in a period of declining resources, they must change by substitution rather than addition. That is, if they want to add a new program or a new service in the absence of new funds, faculty and administrators must decide what they will give up in order to initiate the change" (P.68). But the decision as to which programs are added or deleted must be made with the full involvement of administrators, faculty and students. This element must be present in the planning process.

Neuman (1984) indicated planning to be a future-directed activity that takes place in the present; "...this definitional tension between the future and the present reflects a very real quandary in organizational planning: It is not clear how a planner should divide her attention between the subject of her work, such as action to be taken in the future, and the immediate task of creating plans" (P.1). In higher education when a college is in the midst of an enrollment decline, there are frequently compelling arguments to pay particular attention to the immediate future. Unfortunately, this emphasis may lead one to neglect the structure of the planning process - specifically, who participates in the planning process and what factors contribute to the planning process and what factors contribute to the planning structure. Peterson (1980), Cope (1978), Listov (1976), Priest and Pickelman (1976) and a host of others have provided excellent descriptions of what to include in the planning structure to assure comprehensive participation and support. Ideally, planning should force colleges to anticipate future events and not just react to situational crises.

CONSENSUS PLANNING

If comprehensive planning is to be the vehicle of curriculum change during the period of enrollment contraction and if such planning necessarily involves faculty who are responsible for curriculum then comprehensive planning must be decentralized. Michael Naylor (1984), general director of corporate strategic planning for General Motors, noted recently that the reign of strategic planning was over and that "planning is the responsibility of every line manager. The role of the planner is to be a catalyst for change - not to do the planning for each business unit" (P.4). Meaningful comprehensive planning for colleges and universities reduces itself to strategies for faculty involvement.

Where shall such strategies be found? Quinn (1979) notes that "The most effective strategies of major enterprises tend to emerge step by step from an interactive process in which the organization probes the future, experiments, and learns from a series of partial (incremental) commitments rather than through global formulations of total strategies" (P. 58). There must, then, be a conscious effort to stress planning and not the plan. This effort must continuously alternate in style and format.

Keller (1983) has noted in his now classic work, Academic Strategy: The Management Revolution in American Higher Education, that "he sees this as a period of retrenchment, decline, and realignment. The polar opposite of the growth, expansion, and clear sailing that marked the era between 1955 and 1974. In the years ahead, the colleges will have to adjust to new kinds of students; more and more of them will be Black, Hispanic, foreign, older, retired, and attending college only part time" (P.18). Keller Envisions

colleges reassessing their curriculum and relationships with larger society. He has coined the term "Consensual Planning," which he sees emerging from faculty debates. "Planning" he says, "should ooze out of meetings and encounters almost unnoticed" (P.88).

THE CONSENSUS PLAN AT DUTCHESS COMMUNITY COLLEGE

For the past decade the planning process at Dutchess Community College took place separate from budgeting and curriculum development. It was directed by a group, mostly administrators, who were appointed by the President. The result was usually an orderly plan not known to the majority of faculty and designed to respond to specific state reporting requirements.

Up to Fall 1984, the College, like many two-year colleges, had experienced a decade of growth and expansion. It became clear during the previous spring that the enrollment pattern would be changing. Applications were down and traditionally strong programs like business administration and data processing were beginning to show stable to declining numbers. These changes were particularly disconcerting for Dutchess, an institution which had been over 40% full time when the national average has been 30%. The general belief of most faculty and many administrators as late as summer, 1984, was that "Dutchess was different from other two-year colleges and would suffer little or no enrollment losses in the near future."

It was in this climate that a new planning process was begun, climaxing with the 1984-85 Consensus Plan in September 1984 and just in time to witness the largest loss in enrollment in College history, in excess of 160 FTE (full-time equivalent students).

PROCESS

In December, 1983, the Dean of Planning and Information Services sent letters to members of the professional college community through numerous sub-units (Professional Staff Organization, Instructional Staff Council, etc.). The intention was to make the new planning process as open as possible.

At the initial meetings a comprehensive planning philosophy was discussed and an executive unit was appointed to include the Dean of Planning, a co-chairperson, a secretary and a planning techniques consultant.

The Dean distinguished this planning effort from past endeavors in that it was designed to provide certain major outcomes:

1. A set of college-wide objectives organized both by major functional areas and by major activities (crossing over functional areas).
2. A set of specific impacts for the 1984-85 budget.
3. A college-wide process integrated into departmental planning.
4. A comprehensive planning strategy consistent with, and included in, the Title III federal grant framework.
5. A linkage for the '85 reaccreditation effort.
6. A working relationship with the college marketing committee.

During the second overall meeting, the Planning Committee as a whole identified a series of major issues that would face the College in the future. Then the Committee subdivided itself into task force units in order to move from the issues list to position papers, which would serve as the initial stage for the 1984-85 Consensus Plan. The task force units were as follows:

Environmental Scanning: Identification and assessment process leading to an understanding of the influences external to the College and their impacts on current and future curriculum, enrollment and support services.

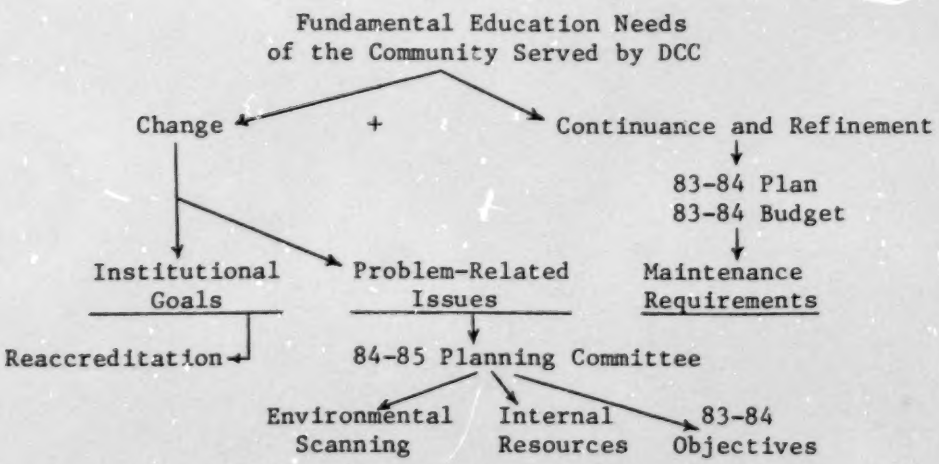
Internal Resources: Consideration of the College's existing resources and assessment of their ability to serve continuing and changing community education needs.

1983-84 Objectives: Review 1983-84 comprehensive plans of the College's five major areas and assess the degree to which comprehensive planning has been carried out in the College organization.

Throughout the spring an Executive Unit consisting of the two co-chairmen, secretary, and planning techniques consultant met as needed to coordinate the efforts of the three task forces. The role of the planning techniques consultant was particularly vital, as he served on each task force, lending continuity to the entire process. (Figure 1 summarized the process through the task force level.)

FIGURE 1

84-85 PLANNING PROCESS



In late spring, 1984, the Dean of Planning reassembled the Planning Committee and presented the members with a first draft of the 1984-85 Plan based on task force position papers. The Committee responded with additional input.

During the summer of 1984, the President and Deans met to consider the draft Plan, as well as to prepare broad department activities that would serve to integrate the Plan into departmental planning.

DEPARTMENTAL REACTION

During the fall 1984 pre-semester activities, the Dean of Planning presented the 1984-85 Consensus Plan to an assembly of all faculty and administrators. Despite early efforts at openness, the first reaction at the departmental level was shock and bewilderment. While most department heads were aware that "something different" was happening in planning, most had not envisioned impact at the department level. Department planning in previous years had been separate from college-wide efforts and shortrun, budget oriented.

The first year of comprehensive planning was marked by substantial faculty input for the first time in the history of the College. This input was not always orderly nor without conflict. For the first time faculty saw planning as less than symbolic and reacted to establish influence, particularly in areas of curriculum.

IMPACT ON CURRICULUM

During the first semester of operation under the Consensus Plan, more curriculum proposals were submitted than in the combined total of the previous four years. The types of proposals fell into three major categories: changes, substitutions and eliminations. In the area of change, low enrollment programs in the same discipline were reorganized around a common core. this lowered administrative non-instructional costs resulting in program continuance at a more efficient level.

While comprehensive planning led to the elimination of some programs and courses, because of the larger framework in which this occurred, new programs were linked to these eliminations creating a substitution procedure. In general the Consensus Plan became an organizing form for expansion and substitution of curriculum, presenting an alternative to retrenchment and program attrition.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Between now and the mid-1990's, the traditional-age college population will decline by about 25 percent. Dutchess Community College, along with other two-year institutions, will have to adjust if it is to continue to contribute socially valuable services. The strength of community colleges has been their ability to offer services to "new students" who have been found unacceptable by other forms of higher education.

It is likely that two-year colleges will be called upon again to offer services to still newer groups as we enter the post-industrial age. The

major change in community colleges which take up the demand of these new students will be in curriculum: its content and mode of delivery. A new planning process will be necessary to deliver these curriculum changes. It will be decentralized, faculty proactive, and feature line managers as planners.

Knoell (1978) has emphasized that opportunity now exists that "community colleges can consider the kind of mix they would like to achieve by 2000, together with a program mix to be offered in order to obtain the desired student mix" (P.80). Dutchess Community College has begun to address enrollment questions through comprehensive planning, diminishing concerns about retrenchment and program attrition.

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